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BALIN AND THE DOLOROUS STROKE

All readers of the second book of Malory's *Morte Darthur* are familiar with the story of Balin and the Dolorous Stroke. The attention of scholars has recently been called to this story by the publication of the early Spanish version¹ of Malory's source for this book. It is now possible to read in detail the story nearly as it came to Malory. Hitherto we had only the French of the Huth MS, in which two entire leaves are missing just at the point where the dolorous stroke was described.²

The story is very briefly as follows:

Balin le Sauvage, angry because two knights have been slain in his escort by an invisible adversary, determined on vengeance. He learned that the invisible foe was Gallan, brother to King Pellam. Pellam was the most holy man in the world. Balin arrived at King Pellam's castle during the progress of a feast, and was told to leave his sword at the door. He kept his sword however and entered the banquet hall. Recognizing his adversary Gallan in the seneschal at the table he slew him at a blow, but was attacked and pursued by King Pellam who snatched up a wooden club. In the *melée* Balin's sword broke and he fled from chamber to chamber of Pellam's castle in search of some weapon. At last in a magnificent chamber he came upon a marvelous lance and with this struck down King Pellam. This was the dolorous stroke; the castle walls fell down, people were slain on every side, the country was laid waste, and King Pellam lay wounded many years till he was healed by Galahad. In Pellam's castle was the Grail; and the spear (called several times however "*la lanche vengeresse*") was the bleeding lance of the Crucifixion.

The pagan and the Christian elements of this story are at war with each other. Pellam is the most holy man in the world, but his brother, who dwells with him in the Grail castle, rides invis-

¹ "Demanda del Sancto Grial," *Nueva Biblioteca de Autores Españoles*, ed. Bonilla, Madrid (1907), VI, 91-120.

² Ff. 136, 137. See Paris et Ulrich, *Merlin*, II, 27.

ible and strikes down innocent knights. The lance is the sacred relic of the Crucifixion but it is called "the Spear of Vengeance" and in the destruction it occasions lives up to this pagan epithet.

Many details of this story when read in full have so vivid a Celtic atmosphere¹ that some time ago I began examining ancient Irish literature in search of parallel tales. Among other parallels I have found one so noteworthy that it ought, I think, to be brought at once to the attention of Arthurian students.²

Aengus of the Terrible Spear made his way to the royal palace of Tara to take vengeance for a wrong done to his sister by Cellach the son of King Cormac.

He reached Tara after sunset and it was a prohibited thing (*geis*) at Tara to bring a hero's arms into it after sunset; so that no arms could be there except the arms that happened to be within it. And Aengus took Cormac's *Crimall* ["bloody spear" according to O'Curry;³ "ornamented spear" according to the Irish Laws⁴] down from its rack and gave Cellach the son of Cormac a blow of it and killed him; and its edge grazed one of Cormac's eyes and destroyed it: And in drawing it back out of Cellach its handle struck the chief of the king's household of Tara in the back and killed him. And it was a prohibited thing that one with a blemish should be king at Tara.

Cormac therefore gave up his throne and spent the rest of his life in retirement.

This story is summarized and quoted from the translation in the *Ancient Laws of Ireland*. Our MS authority for this text is of the fifteenth century but the story of "The Blinding of Cormac" exists in many versions⁵ and surely goes back to a time before the rise of French or English Romance. One version of "The Blinding of Cormac" is in the Book of the Dun, a MS dating from 1106. These versions do not in some respects agree so

¹ Miss Lillian Huggett, a graduate student at Northwestern University, in a paper soon to be published has very clearly brought out the Celtic characteristics of the Balin story.

² Summarized and quoted from the translation given in the *Ancient Laws of Ireland*, III, 82-84, where is also printed the Irish text.

³ O'Curry, *MS Materials*, pp. 48, 512.

⁴ *Ancient Laws of Ireland*, III, 83.

⁵ See *Y Cymmrodor*, XIV, 101-35 (1901); *Eriu*, III, 135-42 (1907); *Anecdota from Irish MSS*, I, 15-24 (1907); and compare as to the date Zimmer, *Haupt's Zeitschrift*, XXXV, 85-87, 117 (1891).

closely with "The Tale of Balin," but on the other hand they supply new coincidences of detail. One of them calls Aengus, for example, "a man fierce and savage"¹ (cf. Balin le Sauvage), and another sums up the destruction wrought by his spear in words that recall more vividly the Dolorous Stroke: "So there fell Cormac's son, and his steward, and Cormac's eye was put out, and nobody was able to lay hold of Aengus before he escaped to his house, and he killed nine of Cormac's warriors as they were pursuing him."²

The parallelism between the Irish tale and "The Story of Balin and the Dolorous Stroke" is sufficiently evident: In both the hero comes to the king's palace as an avenger of a personal wrong. In both is the prohibition against carrying swords into the palace (thoroughly understandable as an Irish *geis*,³ this is not very natural in mediaeval France. Balin remarks that to wear one's sword at a feast is the custom of *his* country). In both tales the mischief is wrought by a spear kept in the palace as a relic or marvel. In both the king's chief steward or seneschal is slain, although in a somewhat different manner. In both the aggressor escapes after killing a near relative of the king, and leaves the king wounded in such a way as to be incapacitated for kingship.

The Irishman who attached this account of the blinding of Cormac to his *Book of Laws* regarded it as sober history and evidently rationalized it as much as possible. From what is known, however, concerning the marvelous character of Irish spears we can readily imagine that we have here a euhemerization of some ancient half-mythological tale about the destruction wrought by an enchanted spear—a tale like the Welsh Enchantment of Britain from which Professor Rhys⁴ has suggested comes the "Dolorous Stroke." I have undertaken an investigation of the "Tale of Balin" in its varied aspects, the results of which I expect to publish shortly. In the meantime it seems to me that

¹ "Fear garg amnus," *Anecdota from Irish MSS*, I, 15, l. 15.

² *Leabhar na h-Uidhre*, f. 53a. The translation is my own.

³ On the Irish *geis* or taboo, cf. Alfred Nutt, *Legend of the Holy Grail*, pp. 212-14.

⁴ Rhys, *Art. Legend*, pp. 291, 292.

only by supposing an identical or related source in Celtic legend can we understand why there should occur this remarkable parallelism of plot between the "Blinding of Cormac" and Balin's "Dolorous Stroke."

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